

CHAPTER XVI RELIGIOUS EXPANSION

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

1

THE eighteenth century was not favourable in England to the growth of spirituality of thought or life. After the first fair promise in Queen Anne's reign, when all promised well for the work and progress of the Church of England, the Georgian period supervened. Of that time it can only be said that whatever religious influences were exerted had their success in spite of the State, and not because of it. Deism in one of its numerous forms became with many the fashionable topic, and its wearisome arguments weighed down many and many a heart and life.

In Bridgwater, as in other places, a calm period of respectable propriety — it cannot be called activity — set in with George the First's accession to the throne. This continued, with varying detail, until the nineteenth century dawned. By that time the Evangelical Revival, followed as it was by the Oxford Movement, breathed upon the dry bones and gave them life. Yet apart from these tendencies there were ideas of sharp divergence (from the religious notions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) steadily growing in Bridgwater, as in other towns. The Reformation settlement, in matters of religion, satisfied some, but it did not satisfy all. To enter into this great subject at all fully would be to enter upon the attempt to analyse religious thought in England for two centuries — a gigantic task. It must here suffice to speak only of the outward indications of the expansion of men's religious ideals, as illustrated by the development of Nonconformist activities and organisations during that period within the Ancient Borough. They were vigorous, and they soon took an active form of their own.

The earliest body of Christian people — other than those belonging to the Church of England — to make their influence felt in Bridgwater, was the Baptist community. It is recorded that they were at work within the town as early as in the sixteenth century, but no written record exists of earlier date than 1689, when Mr. Toby Welles acted as pastor, and ministered to a flock consisting of some forty-nine members. Later on, about the year 1780, they suffered from the most disgraceful

disturbances in the conduct of their services. The place of their worship before 1692 is not accurately known, but in that year a chapel was built in St. Mary Street, which was in use until 1835. It was built behind some old-fashioned houses, through which an archway gave entrance to the building. Mr. Elliott became pastor in 1693, and he experienced many difficulties. In 1717 Mr. Evans succeeded him, and was followed by Mr. Evan Thomas in 1746, and Mr. Charles Harris in 1761. Again the way grew difficult, but Mr. Benjamin Morgan, who came as minister in 1791, in spite of many discouragements, toiled on perseveringly. The work proceeded, with varying yet increasing stability, under succeeding pastors, and in 1829 Mr. Henry Trend entered upon his long ministry of twenty-four years. It was during his term of office that the new Chapel was built, upon the old site, in 1838. Some years later the building was thrown open to the main street, and schoolrooms were erected.

Among the most successful later ministers were the Revs. W. M. Lewis, Henry Moore, and C. H. Marsack Day. The present pastor, the Rev. Herbert Trotman, took up the burden of his work with much vigour in 1896. So well did things prosper that it became necessary to enlarge the Chapel, and also largely to increase the Sunday-school accommodation. The work was taken up with great zeal and enthusiasm, and it has since been completed most successfully. The Baptists are now an exceedingly flourishing body of Christian people in the Town, and their influence is widely felt. Their long spell of effort has always been maintained, and their persevering fidelity to the doctrines of their communion has been rewarded. For three hundred years, or more, they have watched and waited and worked. They are now a strong and firmly established body, and they have gained an assured position in the historic annals of Bridgwater religious life.

Congregationalism is now a strong factor in the town's religious position, and it has been at work since 1793 when an Independent congregation used to meet together for worship. Mr. Corp, a splendid worker, came in 1818, and he

CHAPTER XVI RELIGIOUS EXPANSION

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

2

aroused such enthusiasm that Zion Chapel, in Friarn Street, was built in 1822, and became the home of the congregation. He stayed till 1830, having done a really great work. The Rev. Evan James succeeded him, and it was under his ministry that Sir George Williams (as he afterwards became), then a boy in Mr. Holmes' business house in the town, on a Sunday evening in the winter of 1837, became seriously conscious of religious convictions. He was afterwards the founder and life-long friend of the Young Men's Christian Association. Friarn Street Chapel flourished and increased. The Reverends John Bishop, Robert Panks, and Philip Barker successively became ministers, and in 1855 the Rev. E. H. Jones proved to be so successful that it was decided to build a new Chapel in a more central position. Fore Street was chosen, and the new building was opened in 1864. Since that time it has been considerably improved. Under the present minister, the Rev. Harry Butler, the traditions of successful work have been more than maintained, and the influence of the Congregationalists has decidedly advanced. Connected with the Fore Street congregation is the Mariners' Chapel in Eastover, built in 1838 for work amongst sailors, chiefly by the exertions of Mr. James Samuel Duck, who laboured there till 1869. Since 1886 the Charity Commissioners have issued an Order recognising Mariners' Chapel as an Independent or Congregational Chapel, and in 1897 it began to be conducted as a branch of the Fore Street head-quarters.

It must never be forgotten that the visits of the burning and zealous evangelist, John Wesley, left their vivid mark upon Bridgwater. His first visit to the town was on September 18th, 1746. In his journal he writes: "*About one I preached at Beercrocomb. About five we reached Bridgwater. We expected much tumult here, the great vulgar stirring up the small ; but we were disappointed. The very week before our coming, the Grand Jury had found the bill against the rioters who had so often assaulted Mary Lockyer's house. This, and the awe of God which fell upon them, kept the whole congregation quiet and serious. Before I preached my strength was quite exhausted,*

and I was exceeding feverish through mere fatigue ; but in riding to Middlesey I revived, and in the morning, Friday, the 19th, I rose quite well."

The next year Wesley visited the town, and also in the year following. In his diary, dated July 31st, 1747, he writes: "*About noon I preached at Taunton. Much opposition was expected, and several young gentlemen came, as it seemed, with that design; but they did not put it in execution. From hence we rode to Bridgwater, and even at this dry, barren place, God largely watered us with the dew of heaven. After preaching I rode to Middlesey, intending only to meet the Society ; but notice had been given that I would preach there, so I gave an exhortation to all that were present."*

On Friday, September 30th, 1748, there is an entry in his journal, thus: "*I preached at eleven in Taunton, at three in Bridgwater, at seven in Middlesey."* A hard day's work, indeed. He continues: "*On the next day *' I preached at Waywick about one, and then rode quietly on to Bristol."*

Again in 1750 the good man was here. Monday, the 3rd September, "*About noon I preached at Hillfarrance, three miles from Taunton. Three or four boors would have been rude if they durst, but the odds against them were too great. At five I preached in Bridgwater, to a well-behaved company, and then rode on to Middlesey."* Then a lapse of ten years passes by, and we come to his entry of October 1st, 1760: "*About one I preached at Halberton, and at Tiverton in the evening. The next morning I rode to Maiden-Down, where the congregation was waiting for me. About noon I preached at Taunton. The rain lessened the congregation at Bridgwater, a dead, uncomfortable place at best. About seven we set out thence for Baderip, in as dark a night as I ever saw, but God gave His angels charge over us, and we dashed not our foot against a stone. I was surprised to see a congregation at five in the morning, to whom I spoke with much enlargement of heart."*

In 1769 comes the record of his last visit to the town. "*Friday, 8th Sept., I preached, about nine, at Taunton, and then rode on to Bridgwater, where the preaching had been discontinued for some years. It was supposed there would be much disturbance,*

CHAPTER XVI RELIGIOUS EXPANSION

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

3

but there was none at all. The very gentry (all but two or three young women) behaved with good sense and decency." In the afternoon of the same day he rode on to Brent Hill, and Bridgwater saw his face no more.

His work, however, followed him, and the little band of hearers to whom he had preached did not forget his ministrations to them. He had followers in the town, although, as his Journal tells us, he was not hopeful as to its spiritual condition. The Wesleyans first set to work, it is recorded, in some humble quarters in Eastover, and there they managed to build a small chapel. As early as 1816 they took possession of the King Street Chapel, which has of course been since enlarged and added to in many particulars. Wesleyanism took deep root here, and it flourished. Its quiet influence, as everywhere, has borne good fruit. Were John Wesley living to-day, and were he to visit Bridgwater, the whole town would assuredly flock out to meet him.

The famous old Chapel in Dampiet Street has been sufficiently referred to in the former volume dealing with the history of Bridgwater. Its quaint and restful interior is singularly attractive, and it speaks of the years that have gone — darker and more cruel times, some of them — with peculiar vividness and force. Still the services go on. The Unitarian position is maintained, and the Rev. Rudolf Davis is the minister, most deservedly respected and loved.

In Friarn Street the home of the Society of Friends is yet another building for religious worship, which powerfully attracts the mystic, the quiet, and the contemplative man. The chapel, it is said, was rebuilt in 1801. The Society, however, possessed a Meeting House in 1722, and their brotherhood was in existence before that time. The Friends had a very wide influence in the town from quite early days. The soberness of their way of worship, the calmness of spirit which they inculcate, and the unruffled mien which it is their aim to cultivate are all very lovely things. Indeed, as a wise man said recently, "*the Quakers have something to say for their position.*" The subject is a tempting one, and the student of religious method

would fain linger over it.

Other developments of religious effort have exerted their influence in Bridgwater from time to time. The Catholic Apostolic Church once possessed a following in the town, and for a time they worshipped in a small building in King Street. Their influence was never a very strong or a very evident one, but it was earnest and sincere. The Bible Christians have done good work, and their chapel in Polden Street, under the leadership of the Rev. Matthew Hoare, is a centre of Christian effort which has a tale of much quiet zeal and successful labour to tell. The United Methodists have long maintained their position in the place. And, as in most other towns, the attempt to reach the very humble and poor, as well as the degraded and outcast, has for some years been taken in hand by a branch of the Salvation Army, whose head-quarters are located in the Old Zion Chapel in Friarn Street, which was built through the exertions of Mr. Corp, for the Congregationalists, some eighty- five years ago.

For a long time Cannington was the nearest place to Bridgwater where the Roman Catholic inhabitants could worship. But in 1846 a chapel was built in Eastover, which in 1882 became superseded by the handsome Church of St. Joseph, in Binford Place. There Canon Wadman ministers to his flock, a truly earnest and devoted priest.

As concerning the Church of England, the building of two new churches and one mission chapel within the last seventy years is sufficient to show that the energy of the nineteenth century did something to compensate for the more lax effort of the eighteenth. Holy Trinity Church was built in Dr. Wollen's time, and was first used for public worship in 1839. Afterwards it was constituted a separate parish for ecclesiastical purposes, with a full organisation of its own. Similarly St. John's Church in Eastover was built by the Rev. W. M. Capes, and was consecrated in 1846. The first vicar was the Rev. J. C. Collins. The population and the work grew so rapidly that All Saint's Mission Church was built to meet the new requirements, and was opened on St.

CHAPTER XVI RELIGIOUS EXPANSION

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

4

Mark's Day, 1882.

So rigidly condensed a record as the above can obviously take no account of the progress or internal development of religious thought within the period thus covered. It is not sought even to attempt to do this. For the purposes of this chapter the external and the evident are all that it is sought to adduce in support of the belief that immense religious expansion has taken place in the town since the days of Queen Anne. The thoughts of men, it can hardly be doubted, have widened with the process of the suns.

Edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 23/07/2020